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WASHINGTON, D. C.  
FOR THE NATIONAL ERA.  
STORY OF A LIFE.

BY H. L.  
CHAPTER I.—A Family Group.

In the early part of a lovely June day, some half century since, might have been seen standing on a smooth lawn, fronting a large, irregular old mansion, a group of four sisters—not quite old enough to be considered young ladies, nor yet so young as to be altogether regarded as children. In the family they were called "the girls"—a brother being the dividing-line between them and the three elder sisters of the household; in their vicinity, three little lads were trundling hoops and flying kites, animated in their sports by the notice of their father, who was watching them from the window of his study with a smiling smile of encouragement upon his benevolent countenance.

"Look, papa—look," exclaimed the delighted boys, as the kite soared far above the roof of the venerable old building. "It almost touches the clouds!"

The girls, who had been conversing in an undertone, now joined their brothers, and were about mingling in their sport, when a young officer, dismounting at the gateway, walked up the long avenue, and stood upon the lawn beside the group. Politely bowing, he inquired for Miss Elizabeth, and the eldest of the four proceeded with him toward the house. Ere they reached it, however, she stopped, and said, "There is my sister," exclaiming, and joined the circle on the lawn.

Elizabeth sat in a deep window of the drawing-room. A scarlet riding-habit, closely buttoned in front, displayed her superb figure to the greatest advantage. She was tall, but its long, graceful folds made her height appear greater than it really was. Her fair, white hand rested upon the head of a large dog, who was looking up into her face with an almost human expression of love, in return for her caresses. Elizabeth's face was something of the benign expression of her mother, who, like her, was a woman of a large heart, and it was an indication of the spirit within, if one might almost have deemed a sweet Sabbath of repose had led to a perpetual calm in the smile of Elizabeth. Her eyes were naturally sweet, yet subtle, and like the fine flute-tones of an instrument perfectly under the command of its player. She rose upon the entrance of the officer, returned his greeting with a smile, and then, as if by a magic, she then, carefully pushing aside her flaxen curls, placed her riding-cap, which lay beside her, upon her head. Taking her ivory-handled whip, and gathering the folds of her dress about her, she said—

"You see I am prompt to my appointment," and led the way to the carriage, where a servant held both horses ready for them to mount. The morning was delicious—the dew, scarcely yet exhaled by the sun, rested in glittering drops on every leaf and blade of grass, sparkling among the hawthorn hedges like sunbeams, and the air was fragrant with the perfume of the blossoms.

"Oh, it is a beautiful day," said Elizabeth, as she sprang her horse into a dashing canter. "Every blossom is sending up an incense of praise."

"Yes," replied her companion—  
"The morning shines, and the fresh field  
Calls us to the plow, to the harrow, to the spring.  
Our tilled fields—how the citrons glow,  
What dappled the myrtle, and what the balmy rood,  
How nature paints her colors—how the bee  
Sings on the bloom, and the bird on the wood."

"The quotation is appropriate, and we should render our tribute of thanks to the poet, for thus giving language to the feelings which every grateful heart must experience in the position of such universal blessings as light, sunshine, and air." Elizabeth, like the poet, was a world of clouds—nay, said she, kindling with the picture her fancy had created, "rather let us dwell upon that glorious revelation of God's power. When He said, 'Let there be light,' what a golden flood of rays must have been sent forth at His command, illuminating a newly-formed universe!"

Lieutenant Aylesworth listened admiringly to the enraptured girl; but, skeptical in his own religious belief, did not pursue the conversation. He unfolded, however, in his casual remarks, to induce her to entertain the opinion that his views were correct, and that he was, and this led her into a train of thought, the result of which had an important influence on her after-life. The diversified scenery, the freshness of the morning, and the exhilarating motion of the well-trained horses, lent a charm to these driving rides, long remembered by the lovely sisters, and were recalled with vivid pleasure when the lapse of years and the changes which time unerringly brings, separated them from each other. It would be a pleasant task to trace the history and fortunes of each of the four girls, descended from the ancient family of the Gornways in Normandy. Like the seven Pleiades, they shone in a unity of brightness, bright in attractions. Individually they possessed talent and originality, to which was added a peculiar loveliness of personal appearance, and a depth and warmth of affection, blended with gentle dignity and refinement. So far, they were similar in the general outlines of character; but only for a womanhood developed the peculiar traits of each, and circumstances called their natural powers into action, great individuality was discernible in several of the sisters.

Elizabeth, the eldest, was the most conspicuous; and with her, there, the story will have most to do. It is no fiction. This shrinking, timid girl was moulded into the high-souled and fearless woman; this light-hearted, careless child became a finely-tempered instrument, in the hands of God's Creator, for the benefit of the most degraded of the fallen race of man. Naturally quick of comprehension, her skill in adapting herself to the mental capacities of those around her, betrayed the existence of that uncommon penetration for which she was afterwards so remarkable.

The evening of that day, when this lovely family group is introduced to the reader, was to be closed by a large party at the Hall. Here Elizabeth shone conspicuously, entering with zest into all the amusements; she was the magnet of attraction. Her tall, graceful figure was peculiarly fitted for dancing; and as she moved with a queenly step to and fro, she looked almost regal in her beauty.

Prince William Frederick, afterwards Duke of Gloucester, was then quartered at Norwich, and was sometimes a guest at the old mansion. On these occasions, the fair sisterhood unanimously accorded to Elizabeth the honor of entertaining the royal visitor; and many were the compliments bestowed upon the captivating manners and winning address with which she acquitted herself of the unsought distinction. But a melodious voice was one of her greatest charms. Thrillingly sweet it was to listen to the warbling, bird-like, she poured out—the joyous outpouring of a young heart's gushing gladness, yet a faint prelude to that glorious outpouring of musical deeds, which made her life harmonious in its gradations of goodness.

It may be a surprise to know that the father of these children was a Quaker, belonging to the sect so rigid in its discipline against forms. But so it was: yet the expanded intellect, and enlarged mind of the old gentleman induced while of that great principle of Christianity, which is the corner-stone of all true religion,

independent of sects, he was a firm and conscientious disciple. Not that he was indifferent to the distinguishing traits of his own, but in his fatherly love he could not bear to crush that capacity for innocent enjoyment which the delightful privilege of all young and untroubled hearts; yet he wisely limited it; and Elizabeth's diary bore evident marks of these wholesome restrictions. On one page was written, "I have set my heart on attending the oratorio to-night; the Prince is to be there; it will be a grand sight, and there will be the King and Queen, and my father does not like me to go, much as I wish it, I will give it up with pleasure, if it be in my power, without murmuring." Thus early she accustomed herself to regard the wishes of others; yet, with the gentlest deference to those she loved, she would not be overruled by them. For her mother she had displayed an intensity of affection seldom witnessed in one so young; and when she died, a few years before this time, her deep and heartfelt grief was controlled, only to be more keenly experienced in her hours of solitude, when she lay down on the spot, for a long time after this most afflictive event. But the buoyant hearts of the young are ever elastic, and time mellowed the poignancy of their sorrow. "The cloud is over us," said one of the sisters, "but it has a silver lining." And as days and weeks wore on, so much happiness was stored up in the hearts of those who had been so long in the shadow of grief, that they gradually ceased to weep, yet never forgot the impression left by her death.

Upon the oldest sister, Catharine, devolved the oversight of this numerous family; she was a remarkable woman, and was a constant source of comfort to her mother. Her mind seemed to partake of the strength and power of her physical development—its proportions were as grand and majestic as those of her finely-knit person, but there was a grace rarely equalled in both. Elizabeth's figure was a beautiful delineation of curved lines, willowy, yielding, yet rounded into perfect symmetry. Catharine's was equally symmetrical, but conveyed an idea of strength and massiveness. One was as a beautiful temple the eye rested upon with exquisite delight—the other, a lofty structure, regarded with sensations almost amounting to awe. Both characters, but in different ways. The younger sisters, the talented brother, the cluster of girls, and the little lads, all looked up to Catharine with a feeling of reverence and veneration; and the father, in losing her, would have felt that again his household had lost its mistress. Her intellect was comprehensive and powerful—well calculated to understand the diversities of disposition by which she was surrounded, and eminently fitted for their guidance. Eager for self-improvement, and embracing every opportunity to acquire knowledge, she communicated a degree of her own enthusiasm to those around her; and in the long walks and drives which they frequently took, valuable were the lessons inculcated by this beloved sister. Many a wild blossom, twined carelessly amid the curls of some one of the joyous group, would be chosen as a botanical specimen, and interesting them all in the research, books would be brought from the library, and horevoured to the pursuit of determining its properties. Then there were the globes, also, standing in the well-furnished school-room, and a starry night scene, as if by magic, would be projected on the study of the heavens. At such times the father would mingle with them, and as their thoughts expanded by the contemplation of the infinite power of the Creator, he would, by the suggestion of some sublime passage of Holy Writ, teach them how the earth was made, and how the world was created, and how knowledge was in this manner made so attractive, that it was sought for its own sake; and with pursuits so congenial and employments so varied, it is no wonder Elizabeth thought for a time this world almost enough to satisfy the desires of an immortal nature. But a period was coming when a deeper and broader view of her own responsibility as an individual was to be opened to her understanding. This was through the medium of a minister of that sect in the principles of which she had been educated.

One Sabbath evening the seven sisters sat in a row, as was their habit, under the gallery in the quaint and antique old meeting-house. Frequently had Elizabeth sat there before, her thoughts occupied with the world and its pleasures, restless in body, and longing for a voice to break the oppressive monotony of stillness; but now, as she sat there, a "divine silence," as Charles Lamb calls it, gives an added vitality to the spiritual life; to one struggling to break the earth-fetters which bind the soul to things of time, it may be sweet and soothing; but the young and untroubled heart, as Elizabeth's, is not so easily contented. A man of great natural abilities; he had been, but a few years before, gay and dissipated; and the remembrance of his own weakness and infirmities doubtless led him to great sympathy with the unregenerate. He evidently possessed great natural powers, and he had been, to Elizabeth's ministry, most striking—she wept, and was much agitated—it was the turning point in her life; and when, next morning, the old man sat in her father's home, and prophesied of a great and important calling she would be led into, her emotions were painfully affecting. Doubtless her vivid imagination also had been somewhat worked upon; and when she received the teachings of her friend, she could scarcely believe that a change had indeed been wrought in her heart. And that strange prophecy—what could it mean? Was she the timid girl, to enter into the world, and to be a minister of the Gospel with reluctance, and to consider her call there as a holy duty? It appeared like an impossibility.

In this peculiar state of mental feeling, she soon after visited London, that she might be more acquainted with those amusements and pleasures which she was to give up. Here, owing to the unrestricted intercourse the family had always maintained with those of all denominations, she found many friends ready to minister to her pleasure in various ways. Intellectual companionship was very congenial to her, and this she had many opportunities of enjoying. Her diary at this period was an index of the conflicting thoughts which assailed her. On one page was written, "This morning had a pleasant call on Mrs. Siddons, then on Mrs. T. who gave me some point for the evening. I was painted a little, had my hair dressed, and did look pretty well. Mr. Opie, Amelia, and I went to the opera. I own I do love grand company. The Prince of Wales was there; and I felt more pleasure in looking at his royal highness than in seeing the rest of the company and hearing the music." Opposite these remarks of the outward, I have not enough evidence to describe the sermon—it was very affecting, from Revelations, explained his text beautifully and awfully—most awfully, I felt it to be. He next described the beauty of religion and the spirit of devotion, and the power of the Holy Spirit, and how, looking not through them to nature's God. How walk he hit the state I have been in. This was the same Quaker preacher who had before said, "I am a man of God, and I have a message for you." He had not been so long in the ministry as to have been so hitherto, but he was not hitherto to live for herself.

But with a decided tendency to Quakerism, she could not at this period adopt either the costume, or a dress generally used by them. To her refined taste, there appeared a bluntness in their mode of speaking, inconsistent with politeness. And she was too full of life and gaiety to forego the pleasant dances in the evenings, with her brothers and sisters, and the songs and duets with which they often culminated their hours of recreation. Young, beautiful, and attractive, she seemed fitted to adorn the circle in which she moved, and her natural disposition was averse to the seclusion which characterized even the young among religiously-dedicated Quakers. She returned home, however, resolved to give up the world to display her accomplishments only to the dear home group, and to devote a portion of her time exclusively to the benefit of the poor within the precincts of Earlham.

A lovely little boy had frequently attracted her attention, when she had been rambling about, seeking wild flowers, and gradually winning his confidence, she began to give him a few lessons in the alphabet. Sometimes seated under one of the broad old trees in the park, sometimes in the school-room devoted to the education of her own little brothers. The parents of the child were delighted, and in the exuberance of their gratitude that so fine a lady was teaching their boy, told others, till by-and-by the child became so popular that his pupils amounted to sixty or seventy. These she taught herself, without any assistance, yet found time to pursue her own studies with avidity.

During the ensuing summer, the seven sisters travelled into Wales, with their father. They were a joyful party. Catharine, dignified, serene, yet affable, was ever at her father's side, his friend and companion. Rachel and Elizabeth, closely united with deep and warm affection, enjoyed a delightful interchange of sentiment, and dwelt with pleasure on the beautiful scenery unfolding daily before them. For the latter, nature's peculiar charms—her interest in art was comparatively indifferent; her taste was pure, but not highly cultivated; and in her enthusiastic admiration of the works of God, she recognised no divine inspirations in the results of genius.

To the girls, this journey was a perpetual enjoyment—each varied by new scenes and associations. Scenes of historic interest, studied in the school-room, were now before them, distinct and real, and often, after visiting some old castle, the record of by-gone days, they would gather together in the evening and recall again and again the memories to which it had given rise. In some of the most romantic parts of Wales this was peculiarly the case. The seven sisters would congregate in the parlor of a rustic little inn, situated in the cool mountain regions, and, seated over a bright turf fire, would dwell upon the incidents of the day with most glowing interest. Her interest, for the first time, was gathering knowledge from actual observation. Sometimes an old Welsh harper would add to the interest of these social evenings; and the sisters, ever ready to please, would sing, in return, English ballads and songs, till the father's voice would warn them of the hour of rest.

It was during this time they paid a visit, long afterward remembered by Elizabeth. A descendant of Barclay of Ury, a cousin to both their parents, was living in quiet retirement in a beautiful little cottage at Plebsbrook Dale; and here, after a little arrival, at a pleasant and interesting time, the seven sisters were a lady, possessing singular beauty, and elegance of manner; her eyes were strikingly brilliant, and remarkable for their power of expression. Her figure was small, but perfect. She was of the old school, and had retained many of its forms and dignities, the world was a generous, but somewhat formal. Even her costume partook in a measure of the ancient regime; she retained the pointed bodice and long black hood worn by her ancestors, which gave much character to her appearance. To Elizabeth, she was a person rich in attractions; she had early received the influence of her father's religion, but somewhat formal. 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